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# Essays: Between the Present and the Past

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## The Present on the Offensive?

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TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 2, S. 13–28

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### 1. Turning to the Present

In the last ten years, the present has become the focus of discussions about contemporary temporal regimes. Especially within temporal studies, it is generally accepted that we are now living in a present-oriented time regime.<sup>1</sup> This turn towards the present is all the more visible, the more tangible its relationship becomes with the memory boom that has dominated the humanities in the last three decades, directing our attention to the past or – in more nuanced definitions of memory work – to the relationship that the present establishes with the remembered

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<sup>1</sup> See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present. Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); François Hartog, *Chronos. The West Confronts Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

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past.<sup>2</sup> As some memory scholars argue, the opposition between looking at the past and focusing on the present is not particularly sharp: for example, Andreas Huyssen shows that in the late 1980s there was a shift in interest from the present future to the present past.<sup>3</sup> Traces of Huyssen's theory (and of other theses linking the past with the present or the present with the future) can be found in most concepts regarding the present orientation of our current temporal regimes, including the widely discussed ideas of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht regarding the nature of the current chronotype (oriented precisely at "now") or the present, in which the past remains latent, but still susceptible to changes and transformations taking place under the influence of current events (to simplify slightly: the latent past influences the present, but the present also transforms the remembered vision of the past, so the relationship between what was and what is remains dynamic).<sup>4</sup>

Given the many important differences between the theories that I have mentioned, they should be considered as separate diagnoses and responses to the present day, which is now, more than ever, focused on the present. However, some similarities are hard to miss: all the theories cited above are quite reluctant to define the present, departing from the language of philosophy used in the earlier attempts of temporal analyses<sup>5</sup>; they recognize the existence of certain bridges between the present and the past, and – which is extremely interesting in my opinion – they all almost axiomatically acknowledge that the future has disappeared from our field of view.

We can therefore say – making some gross simplifications at the beginning of this article, which are nonetheless necessary to pose the research question more clearly – that the orientation towards the present and the belief in the present character of the current chronotype results, first of all, from the preconception that the past is slowly ceasing to be the center of our interest, and the future has not been there for a long time.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, it is a direct

2 See Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

3 See Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 1 (12) (2000).

4 See Gumbrecht, *After 1945*, 45.

5 This is especially clear when compared, among others, to Krzysztof Pomian's famous publication *Porządek czasu* [The order of time], trans. Tomasz Stróżyński (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2014).

6 In some theses, the interest in the future started to fade with the beginning of Second World War. See Huyssen, "Present Pasts"; Aleida Assmann, *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, trans. Sarah Clift (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2020).

outcome of the thesis that, in recent centuries, “now” has not usually been a separate point of interest, also due to the problems associated with defining what exactly “now” means. Thirdly, it employs the belief that in the last ten years something has changed drastically in our perception of time relations.

Without denying outright the value of this reasoning, I would like to consider whether the commonly reported loss of interest in the future or the past and the change in the contemporary chronotype are synonymous with focusing on the present. It seems premature to me to automatically exclude the thesis that what we are now observing is the emergence of a new type of interest in the future, and therefore, in fact, a continuation of the trend from the beginning of modernity. In this case, the interest in the past and memory, observed approximately for the last thirty years, should not be interpreted as an opposition to the previous future orientation, but rather as a specific complication of it. In other words, perhaps the change in time orientation from the present future to the present past was an episode rather than a lasting trend, but this nuance might be hard to spot when we still define the future in accordance with the modernist paradigm.

To simplify again, I believe that the major change in the current chronotype and the fact that we are observing temporal evolution is indisputable. I also agree that in this process the past loses its distinctive position, but I cannot agree that focusing on the present does not mean (and is not conditioned) by at least a subconscious return of interest in the new forms of the future. To at least partially explain my argument, I would like to briefly refer to one of the more recent theories regarding presentism: that is, François Hartog’s concept of temporal regimes.

## 2. Double Presentism

François Hartog belongs to that group of thinkers who, several years ago, at the beginning of the change in thinking about time relations diagnosed here, proposed a theory indicating that we are currently living in a period of *presentism*. In *Regimes of Historicity*,<sup>7</sup> Hartog argued that three dominant temporal regimes should be distinguished: the first, as old as Western culture, was focused on the past, treated as a source of the tradition important for the development of humanity. In this time regime, the past was interpreted as a reservoir, carrier, and medium of meaning, crucial for building a valuable present and future. This period ends with the French Revolution: what revolution is expected to bring is fundamentally different from the present and the past, and yet it is valued as positive. Or maybe even more: it is perceived

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7 Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

as positive not despite being different from the past, but simply because of it. This new, future-oriented time regime puts new projects at the center of attention: it is the future that is supposed to bring change and redefine what should really matter. Therefore, sacrifices begin to be made not in the name of the past, but in the name of the future.

However, while the first of the historical regimes noted by Hartog lasted thousands of years, the second barely survived a century and a half: two world wars, as well as the fall of communism – considered, not only by Hartog, as a futuristic project – herald its rather abrupt end. This end marks the beginning of the presentism regime: the date of its beginning is somewhat unclear, but Hartog claims that at least from the 1970s to the 1990s there was little to no interest in the future. He treats the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of communism and the rise of the capitalist order in Eastern Europe – somewhat similarly to the ideas of Francis Fukuyama – as the end of a certain way of thinking about history, in which we expected constant growth and development. The end of history is for Hartog the beginning of presentism.

Hartog also repeated the diagnosis of the presentist orientation of the contemporary time regime in a more recent publication entitled *Chronos: L'Occident aux prises avec le Temps* (published in 2020 and translated into English in 2022). In this book, the philosopher slightly expands and modifies his earlier thesis: in his view, contemporary presentism is, to some extent, the result of adopting a Christian model of understanding time.

In *Chronos*, the starting point for Hartog's theoretical argument is early Christianity, but he tries to prove that Christian presentism also influences the latest concepts regarding time, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's category of planetary age.<sup>8</sup> It is best to start the reconstruction of Hartog's theory with a quotation regarding the researcher's definition of time:

What is that time? What is our relation to time? What is our “today” – few would be tempted to call it a “beautiful today” – made of? The thread unifying this work of conceptual history is the regime of historicity's radar, and the goal has always been to illumine temporal crises. In those moments shifting landmarks throw us off balance, and the articulations of past, present, and future come undone.<sup>9</sup>

Hartog is therefore most interested in crises and gaps that are – at least partially – represented by three key categories: *Chronos*, *Kairos*, and *Krisis*.

8 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

9 Hartog, *Chronos*, XX.

In defining *Chronos*, Hartog is inspired in equal measure by ancient Greek philosophy and the thought of Saint Augustine. He also underscores its dual nature: it is the kind of time which we experience everyday as passing (and whose passage we are able to measure), and also – in reference to God – it is of eternal duration, something that will never end.

*Kairos* is much more ambiguous and can best be described through reference to Greek tragedies: they commonly present a pivotal moment, an instance at which the fate of heroes changes drastically. Still, the heroes (such as Oedipus, who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother) are usually unaware of why their actions carry such great meaning just now. Therefore, *Kairos* carries in itself a certain kind of hope and threat: only recognition that one is immersed in this specific time frame allows one to take the right decisions and actions:

Kairos differed fundamentally from *chronos*, which is our measurable, flowing time; it opens on the instant, the unexpected, but also the opportunity to be seized, the crucial opening, the decisive moment. By bestowing a name on *kairos* we grant it a status, and we acknowledge that human time, which is to say that of well-regulated action, is a blend of *chronos* time and *kairos* time.<sup>10</sup>

The third of the notions mentioned, *Krisis*, refers to at least two contexts: the first is judgment, and the second is the dichotomy of health and malady. In the latter case, *Krisis* is a pivotal point at which the patients either begin to heal or their death becomes certain.

What is especially interesting is that for Hartog, *Krisis* and *Kairos* are the key to understanding Christian temporality, or, more precisely, the specific temporal moment in which we currently reside according to the Christian doctrine: it is the time after the first coming of the Savior, which did not bring about the end of the world or the final judgment. It opened a new order (“New Testament”) instead, which will remain unresolved until the second coming (the term used here by Hartog is *Parousia*, which is more common in other European languages). A particularly important distinction here is that *Krisis* revolves around the act of judgment itself, whereas *Kairos* is focused on the temporal rupture that accompanies it: on the time between both comings of Jesus. This temporal rupture is of the greatest significance to Christianity, because it is in its span that the whole development of this religion occurs. What was initially supposed to be a short period of time has instead turned into an undefined, expansive contemporaneity, and therefore the Christian

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5.

*Kairos* has absorbed *Chronos* as well, annexing the calendar order to represent the cyclical rhythm of Christian holidays.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that Hartog argues that the Christian understanding of time is responsible for reevaluating the relationship between the old and the new, shifting the vector of interest to the new – the New Testament, the New Covenant – which in turn means that the new replaces the old, and the old has meaning only as an announcement of the new. Moreover, the horizon of expectations begins to be marked by the apocalypse, which is to be actively awaited. The Christian apocalypse, understood as the final *Krisis*, constructs *Kairos* from the present time – a time of rupture in which *Chronos* still flows (somewhat like in Saint Augustine’s concept of the human state), but should be subordinated to *Kairos*.

Of course, as Hartog rightly points out, maintaining the feeling that we live in the time of *Kairos* required numerous steps from Christianity (first, shifting the time of the expected *Krisis* from “immediately” to an unspecified future; then, indicating that the *Krisis* will take place unexpectedly, and therefore it is necessary to constantly prepare for what is to come; and finally, implementing the idea that the apocalypse is a specific closure of time in which, as in Saint John’s vision, temporal relations are flattened and the past, future and present overlap each other).<sup>12</sup>

To give a brief summary of Hartog’s theses: the presentist temporal order absorbed by Western culture through Christianity rests upon a conviction that we are living at a time of *Kairos*, in a specific temporal environment shaped by two time points: the first coming of the Savior (the one that occurred in the past) and the second coming (which is yet to happen in the future). The imaginings of the future and the memory of the past are shaped exactly by the recognition of this specific temporal regime.

According to Hartog, this specifically presentist temporal order lasts for quite a long time, activating various adaptive strategies during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it begins to crumble under the influence of the French Revolution (with its concept of newness and rupture and the idea of a different calendar), and under pressure from scientific discoveries – especially the development of geology and establishing of the true age of the Earth (which is fundamentally at odds with Christian traditions), as well as Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. It finally falls apart with the onset of modernity, which not only introduced a uniform system of measuring time but also led to a significant acceleration in the rate at which changes occur in

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 40–63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40–63.

society. Modernism is therefore the beginning of a new era, in which a future-oriented time regime starts.<sup>13</sup>

However, this new temporal order erodes quite quickly – that is, as in Hartog's previous theory, just after the failure of great future-oriented projects, such as communism or fascism, and the shock caused by the course of Second World War, especially the Holocaust. Hartog argues that the use of nuclear weapons in Second World War is another reason why there is a slow retreat from the future-oriented *Chronos* to *Kairos*: the risk of their subsequent use during the Cold War opens a new temporal mode, a new "in-between" – between the creation of nuclear power and the apocalypse that it might unleash.<sup>14</sup> The second event that is especially pivotal in the formation of the secular *Kairos* is the onset of the Anthropocene<sup>15</sup> and the threat of climate disaster that opens another kind of in-between – between the start of radical human influence exerted on the environment and the disaster that this brought.

To sum up, Hartog assumes that the threat of a nuclear catastrophe,<sup>16</sup> combined with the diagnosis of the Anthropocene, marks the beginning of a new presentism. Its constitutive features are turning away from the future understood as a positive project; acceleration; suddenness of contemporary times; presentist politics focusing on the here and now; a certain political focus on prevention, and a clear caution in formulating political projects. Interestingly, focus on memory is, according to Hartog, also a part of a new presentism, as memory is treated as something active, that is – reconstructed from a contemporary perspective. For Hartog, therefore, the Anthropocene and the threat of ultimate climate catastrophe are a new incarnation of Christian *Kairos*. The religious, supernatural perspective is replaced here by the indeterminacy of the time of the Anthropocene (it both extends into the future, because it is difficult to determine when this era could end, and is extrapolated into the past, because it is impossible to determine when exactly we entered

13 Ibid., 189–210.

14 In his analyses devoted to the impact of nuclear weapons on our contemporary perception of time, the philosopher follows the theses of Günther Anders, but for him the "supra-threshold" of the catastrophe is less important, and more important is its final – and therefore in a sense mystical – character. See Günther Anders, *L'obsolescence de l'homme: Sur l'âme à l'époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle*, trans. Christophe David (Paris: Ivrea, 2002); Paweł Mościcki, "Apokalipsa Teraz!" [Apocalypse now!], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2020).

15 Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *IGBP Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.

16 Paul Crutzen and John W. Birks, "The Atmosphere After a Nuclear War: Twilight at Noon," *Ambio* 2/3 (1982): 114–25.

this stage of introducing irreversible changes into the natural environment), with its hard-to-imagine scale (for example, imagining the duration of the Earth is impossible from the perspective of human life). Moreover, although Hartog consistently distinguishes *Krisis* – the final judgment and division – from crises, that is smaller breakthrough moments, the climate crisis is to some extent underdefined: it is difficult to decide whether it is a crisis that may yet be overcome, or already the *Krisis*, whose only solution can be a secular apocalypse. This vagueness, however, is intended to serve the purpose of opening a new, climate *Kairos*, in which things (including the possibility of the continued existence of the world) are only being decided.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. The Theoretical Obsolescence of the Future and its Practical Return

I discussed Hartog's theory in such detail because it can be considered an example of a broader trend of defining the current time as a moment of special interest in the present. In this respect, the concept of presentism can be treated as an umbrella term that includes at least several separate, but similar theories: both those of Gumbrecht<sup>18</sup> and Huyssen on the present past, and of Aleida Assmann, who suggests that the future has permanently disappeared from our field of interests, mainly for ethical reasons.<sup>19</sup> Although these theories differ fundamentally in terms of assessing the value of the past for the present (for Assmann and Huyssen it still plays a fundamental role for the present; it is also important – albeit to a lesser extent – for Gumbrecht; but for Hartog it basically lost all of its value during the French Revolution) and the role of memory in building the present, they unanimously assume that we are no longer interested in the future. The future, I would add, that is defined in a very specific way: as constructing collective, positive projects.

In the aforementioned theories, therefore, the future is defined according to the modernist paradigm, so naturally the fall of this paradigm brings with it

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17 Hartog interprets Chakrabarty's concept of planetary age similarly (*The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*): it is the overlap of History (i.e. *Chronos*) and climate change (i.e. *Kairos*) that determines the specificity of contemporary times.

18 In Gumbrecht's case, the concept of the latent duration of the past as a force shaping the present and the theory of chronotypes are based on the same belief: that the future has stopped shaping our field of reference.

19 Assmann points out that, as a result of the trauma of the Holocaust, it is our moral obligation to shift our focus from the future to the past. Despite seeing the negative consequences of the disappearance of the future as a landmark for the present, she considers the retreat from thinking about the future to be a natural consequence of the failure of large modernization projects. See Assmann, *Is Time Out of Joint?*, 5–20.



the fall of the future. What is even more interesting is the fact that if the future is either not clearly defined as one, common goal, or is not a positive project, shared by all, it magically ceases to be considered the future. The next weakness of these concepts concerns the sudden acceleration of the chronotype changes: the period of interest in the past (which lasted thousands of years) is interrupted by a very short period of interest in the future (which started no earlier than during the French Revolution), which already begins to erode before the mid-twentieth century. In the second half of the twentieth century, new time regimes are interested either in the past, or in the specific mix of the past and present, or in the present itself. This diagnosis indicates that, on the one hand, changes in chronotypes are now taking place much faster than before, but on the other, the period of expansion of the present is definitely still ongoing.

The diagnosis that the future has ceased to be an important part of the current chronotype is therefore based on the preconception that the lack of grand, positive, collective projects, or collectively shared visions of a positive future, means that we are not interested in the future itself.<sup>20</sup> In my opinion, it is worth asking how this reasoning works in the light of growing interest in the topic of ecological catastrophe, especially climate catastrophe (still understood as an element of the future, not the present, as the “true” catastrophe is yet to come). I also wonder why, when defining the present in terms of its attitude towards time, so little attention is paid to what actually shapes the present – especially present fears and hopes. And I strongly argue that “this something” is the future, which – I am reversing Gumbrecht’s theory here – latently lies in the present. It is not a future understood as a collective, positive project, but it is the future nonetheless.

The climate catastrophe is an exceptionally good (although not the only) example of such a future. Its theoretical power results from the fact that many thinkers – including Hartog – do not deny its existence, but instead try to include this future threat in the model of presentism, and therefore transform something that is an obvious signal of interest in the future into part of the extended present. According to Hartog’s concept, the climate catastrophe works as a secular apocalypse (final *Krisis*), which opens a new in-between (a secular *Kairos*): between the beginning of the catastrophe (which started in an unspecified past, when human influence on the planet’s future has already become overbearing) and its fulfillment.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that while the *Chronos-Kairos-Krisis* triad works very well when we want to explain the relationship between the religious and secular (pre-modern) concept of time, it is not so effective if

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20 I am referring here to Assmann’s comments in *Is Time Out of Joint?*, 6.

we try to use it to explain a complex physical phenomenon like the climate catastrophe. And if we try to interpret the climate catastrophe and religious apocalypse as some kind of analogous events, then the temporal relations within secular *Kairos* would be much more complex than what Hartog described: they would concern the present, in which the past latently lingers (past beginning of the catastrophe), and the future, whose influence on the present already exists (for example: present awareness of the future threat and present attempts to avoid the future).

Interestingly, the complex temporal structure of the ecological and climate catastrophe has already been analyzed by numerous scholars,<sup>21</sup> including in Poland,<sup>22</sup> and been the subject of many detailed interpretations.<sup>23</sup> It has even featured as a main theme of popular series (and not only in the last year or two: for example, the final season of one the award-winning Netflix series *The Affair* combines an interest in the consequences of the titular romance and the climate catastrophe, shown from a future perspective).<sup>24</sup>

If the broad manifestations of not only the awareness of the ecological catastrophe but also its complex temporal structure (including the future in which it will be fully realized; the present in which the catastrophe is taking place; and the past in which it was initiated) are so visible even in popular culture, not to mention academic research, it is quite surprising that this topic is still being researched in the field of temporal studies, for which it should be a primary point of interest. It also worth underlining that, if catastrophic thinking should be treated as a manifestation of a new type of temporality, it is difficult to treat this temporality as immersed solely in the present: although

21 Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm. Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018).

22 Mościcki, "Apokalipsa Teraz!"

23 See Joanna B. Bednarek, "Zacznijmy od końca" [Let's start from the end], *Czas Kultury* 17 (2022); Magdalena Ochwat, "Katastrofa klimatyczna non-fiction" [Non-fiction climate catastrophe], *Kultura Współczesna* 2 (2020); Anna Herman, *Krytyka ekofeministyczna a katastrofa klimatyczna. Narracje o kryzysie w "nareszcie możemy się zjadać"* [Moniki Lubińskiej] [Ecofeminist criticism and the climate catastrophe. Narratives about the crisis in "we can finally eat each other" by Monika Lubińska], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* LXIV (2021).

24 In the last season, the plot achronologically shows the fate of the main characters (two married couples: Alison and Cole and Noah and Helen), marked by signs of the present: fires in California and the #metoo social movement, as well as the adventures of Alison's daughter, which are taking place in the near future, in the era of a fulfilled ecological catastrophe. The fate of one of the most important characters in the series, Alison (and the mystery of her death), is related to certain climate changes (the water level in the ocean).

most theoretical studies emphasize the fact that the catastrophe is already taking place,<sup>25</sup> its full potential can only be realized in the future, or – which is an optimistic version of the same variant of thinking – through current actions, a certain vision of the future will be avoided.

Furthermore, catastrophic thinking is not the only manifestation of the existence of the future in the present. The second, at least equally important signal, suggesting that the future has not completely disappeared from the field of references of the present, is the technological and futurological consequences of the changes currently taking place, regarding the development of both artificial intelligence and the metaverse. The third one, which has been visible for years (paradoxically, at least since the advent of the temporal paradigm, which, according to most researchers, is supposed to be focused on the present, that is since the 1990s), is the clear interest in various forms of utopia and dystopia in culture and art. The fourth is the development of theories and concepts regarding prevention, preemption and premediation (for example, the optimistic version of averting the climate catastrophe is based on the mechanism of prevention or preemption: for the societies of the global North, the motivation to introduce political and economic changes is not the current climate catastrophe in the South, but the future consequences of this catastrophe for the North).

I will try to briefly describe these phenomena one by one. A year ago, a new technological tool was premiered, ChatGPT. In simple terms, this is a technology based on artificial intelligence in which the system itself learns the answers to the questions asked (i.e., it does not answer on the basis of any algorithm, but – using a language reserved rather for describing the accumulation of knowledge by humans – it learns based on all available information, including the questions that it is currently being asked). In a sense, this is not a breakthrough technology: for years, simple conversations with customers have been conducted via automated chats. Now, however, ChatGPT is able to perform much more difficult tasks, precisely because of its ability to learn – although it may sound strange – based on its own experience. The first experiments with the use of ChatGPT (including user tests, as the chat can – at least for now – be used without additional fees) indicate its great potential and lead to a growing concern related to the possibility of using it as a work automation tool, as well as one enabling students to cheat more easily. Not surprisingly, there have already been accusations that ChatGPT or another

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25 See, for example, Tomasz Markiewka's thesis that disaster is no more a future theme, but a present problem ("Katastrofa jest za progiem" [Disaster is just around the corner], *Dwutygodnik.com*, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/8632-katastrofa-jest-za-progiem.html>).

similar tool was used to create an expensive – and currently not very successful – report on universities in Poland.<sup>26</sup>

The metaverse is a fundamentally different tool: it is virtual reality, the experience of which is to become as real as the experience of reality, thanks to, among others, VR glasses (and in the future, probably also other sensory simulators). For now, the development of the metaverse mainly provides entertainment (just like the fledgling ChatGPT), but if it develops in line with current forecasts (and does not become overly expensive), it will most probably also become a therapeutic tool, allowing in some cases to rehabilitate motor functions, and in others, where rehabilitation is no longer possible, to re-experience lost motor skills. What is really interesting is the fact that, before the metaverse fully debuted, it was already the subject of interest in numerous cultural texts, including the television series *The Peripheral* based on William Gibson's novel (Amazon production, 2022), in which the world of the metaverse is so well developed that it is possible to practice specific skills in it, including motor skills. Metaverse players acquire competences in virtual reality that translate one-to-one into skills in the real world (which is also divided in time and in which the future plays a significant role, secondarily influencing the present of the main character, Flynnne).

Therefore, the current emergence of new technological tools is not only accompanied by the creation of a vision of their use and development in the future, but even more: before given technologies make their debut, they have already become an inspiration for fictional texts. One can, of course, argue that such phenomena are nothing new, since similar futurological trends were already visible at the beginning of the twentieth century, but this argument actually serves in favor of the thesis formulated in this article: since a certain durability of futurological thinking can be noticed from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, why do we assume that the future no longer interests us?

Of course, the predictions that the development of the technologies highlighted above, ChatGPT and the metaverse, may contribute to a radical reformulation of what our future will look like, do not have to come true. Although the first experiments with ChatGPT indicate the possibility of using it for various tasks, including those traditionally considered to require

26 Cf. Beata Maciejewska, Marcin Rybak and Marcin Sztandera, "Skandal uniwersytecki. Czy UJK za milion złotych sporządził raport wygenerowany przez sztuczną inteligencję?" [University scandal. Did Jan Kochanowski University prepare a report generated by artificial intelligence for a million zloty?], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 5, 2023, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://kielce.wyborcza.pl/kielce/7,47262,29730166,skandal-uniwersytecki-czy-ujk-za-milion-zlotych-sporzadzil.html?disableRedirects=true>.

considerable competences (from creating graphics, editing and translating texts, through air traffic supervision, to creating medical metadata, which in turn may contribute to advances in medical science), this does not mean that all of this potential will be realized. Nonetheless, it is hard not to consider the emergence of these two technologies as a manifestation of, first of all, thinking about the future as a certain project (I do not claim that this type of thinking about the future is collective in the same sense that Gumbrecht or Hartog propose, but it certainly concerns the collective and will probably have global effects). Secondly, it is difficult to deny that they are rooted in a rather classically understood futurology.

I will try to explain in more detail why I have identified as symptoms of the ongoing domination of the future in the current chronotype these seemingly different phenomena, that is the expansion of the topic of natural disasters and the development of two new technologies (including their influence on culture and literature), correlated with the growing popularity – also political – of doctrines that aim to either prevent or predict some version of the future. As I have already pointed out, there is nothing particularly new in the correlation of technological development and interest in the future, expressed in science fiction genres. However, in recent years, the connection between technological development and fictional, futurological visions has become deeper and clearer than before. “Metaverse” is a word taken from the science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, and the prediction of the development of artificial intelligence and the possibility of total immersion in virtual reality has been the subject of many novels and films, including the record-breaking *Matrix* films (directed by the Wachowskis), whose fourth instalment, not coincidentally, was released only in 2021. The future of technological change is therefore a topic that engages us collectively in the present (questions about how the development of artificial intelligence will change the labor market are now widely repeated, with both hope and anxiety).

The vision of technological development and the vision of ecological catastrophe are two dominant (and often not contradictory) versions of a possible future, developed in numerous utopias, dystopias and alternative histories.<sup>27</sup> Many of those visions are temporally complex, that is, based not on one

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27 There are also more and more academic articles devoted to this topic, including those that return to the less recently used category of retroopia. See, among others, Karolina Wierel, “Literackie dystopie początku XXI wieku – między realizmem a fantastycznością” [Literary dystopias of the early twenty-first century: Between realism and fantasy], in *Fantastyka a realizm*, ed. Weronika Biegłuk-Leś, Sylwia Borowskiej-Szarszun and Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk (Białystok: Temida, 2019), 13–153. The topic of ecological disaster is also well-studied in Poland, see, among others, Aleksandra Ubertowska, “Krajobraz po

version of possible future, but on multiple versions of possible futures, or on a vision of the future that is already embedded in the present (either latently, as a not yet fully realized possibility, or as a particular threat or hope). This phenomenon, like the colonization of the present with visions of possible futures, is now noticed even by researchers who claim – like Hartog – that we are stuck in a time of new presentism. This means that what was once defined as a manifestation of futurological thinking is now characterized as a manifestation of the negotiation of the present, as if the future was absorbed by the present, rather than the present being shaped by future possibilities and threats. I find this change in the interpretation of the trend very interesting – much more so than the stubbornly repeated theses about the present orientation of the current chronotype. It is worth asking, therefore, why clear manifestations of thinking about the future as a threat or warning are treated as a manifestation of interest in the present. It is rather obvious that even at the beginning of the twentieth century, visions of the future were created for the present change, and yet that period is treated as focused on the future, not on the present.

The only answer that seems likely is the qualitative difference in the mentioned visions: currently, there are few that paint the future in bright colors, and the imagined changes are rather negative. Hence the interest in those types of thinking about the future that are aimed not at bringing it closer, but at preventing it. The doctrines of prevention, preemption,<sup>28</sup> and premediation<sup>29</sup> are not only well developed theoretically, but also widely used in politics. Brian Massumi, who analyzed the functioning of contemporary affects, pointed out how the system of alarms and alerts<sup>30</sup> (currently widely used not only in USA, but also in Poland) influences our perception of reality as threatening and how it can also serve to build a policy that promises us false security

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Zagładzie. Pastoralne dystopie i wizje 'terracydu' [The landscape after the Holocaust. Pastoral dystopias and visions of "terrace"], *Teksty Drugie 2* (2017).

28 In this article, I define these terms after Brian Massumi, *Ontopower. War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). I wrote more on this topic in Justyna Tabaszewska, "Przeszłe przyszłości. Afektywne fakty i historie alternatywne" [Past futures. Affective facts and alternative histories], *Teksty Drugie 5* (2017).

29 Richard Grusin, *Premeditation. Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

30 The alerts always concern a future danger or a current threat that may only be fully realized in the near or distant future. Referring to the Polish reality, which is relatively little immersed in pre-emergence politics, the RBC alert system is intended to warn about future violent weather events, and not, for example, a current storm.

and fuels something that, following Hartog, can be considered a manifestation of presentism, that is the desire for reality to remain unchanged.

#### 4. A Punctual Future and a Looping Present

The desire for the unchangeability of the present and the need to protect it from a threatening future are therefore the real tropes of the current chronotype. However, the question remains whether this chronotype is really focused on experiencing the present: if our task is to control the future so that it does not threaten the already established state of affairs, what is the main subject of interest – the present or the future?

The above question is partly built on a false alternative. I do not think that the contemporary chronotype can be described by choosing only one of these options, just as I do not think that interest in the present replaces focus on the future (or vice versa). Instead, we are observing the creation of a novel, complex temporal structure in which the relations between the past, the future and the present are subject to a specific loop, clearly visible when analyzing the functioning of the climate catastrophe in, for example, Hartog's concept. The presentness of the disaster does not mean its reduction to "now." On the contrary, it reveals in the present that certain processes that were initiated in the past will fully reveal their threatening consequences in the future. The danger and threat have neither begun now, nor will they end now, but the time to react is now and in the near future, as the past cannot be changed, and the only chance to avert threatening future is immediate action.

This means that the temporal relations between the present and the future are flattened, and time is accelerated. Nevertheless, this is not a presentist flattening in the sense in which Hartog wrote about it: after all, the purpose of taking action in the present is not to prepare for the future of a religious apocalypse that will end human existence on Earth, but to negotiate the future of the catastrophe and replace it with another future – one in which there will still be place for human existence on Earth. At stake in this temporal game is not achieving *Krisis*, but avoiding it and reopening time for the future.

Of course, the "new" future understood in this way is rather vague and defined by negation: it is supposed to be a future other than that of catastrophe. Nevertheless, this future is significantly different from the present, since the basis of ideas about what is yet to come is imminent change, which will occur either way: maybe it will be a change that is a continuation of the present mistakes and bring with it a climate catastrophe; maybe it will be a change that will start now and enable us to avert to catastrophe. In both cases, the present is oriented towards the changing future, towards what is to come, and the fact that it is not an optimistic vision does not change the goal; that

is the transformation of a threatening and negative future into something that will be different both from catastrophic visions of the future, and from this present that is slowly turning into a past in which the beginning of the catastrophe has been missed.

*Translated by Rafał Pawluk*

## Abstract

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*The Present on the Offensive?*

The article critically analyzes theses on the dominance of the present in contemporary chronotype. I analyze the theories of A. Assmann, H. U. Gumbrecht, A. Huyssen, F. Hartog, and F. Fukuyama to show that – although some chronotype change is indeed currently happening – it is somewhat simplistic to describe the contemporary historical regime as presentist. Thus, I propose a new take on the relationship between the dominance of the present and the alleged disappearance of the future from the humanities. I do so by indicating the theoretical importance of specific categories, such as catastrophe, which – counter-intuitively – are directed at the present and the future to the same extent.

## Keywords

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the present, the future, presentism, chronotype, time studies, memory studies